

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

MORTE D'ARTHUR

EDITED WITH
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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INTRODUCTION.

I. NARRATIVE POETRY.

GENERAL. A narrative poem is one which narrates an event or series of events. Its interest lies mainly in the incidents and the characters; not in the feelings or thoughts of the poet, nor in any moral lesson derived from the incidents. It is one of the earliest forms of poetry and has always been the most universally popular. So in the days of old men crowded round the rhapsodists of Greece, or the minstrels of England, to hear the recital of the wars of Greece and Troy or of the struggle of Beowulf with the dragon. So in the nineteenth century men hastened to buy and to read the verse-tales of Scott or Byron.

At the present day the prose novel tends to absorb and replace all other forms of literature. The increasing complexity of civilization has brought with it a complexity of thought which seeks an ampler scope for expression than is afforded by poetry, and prefers the more leisurely, less concentrated medium of prose. But even to-day, in the incredible mass of prose fiction poured forth annually the world over, for the vast majority of readers the

story is practically the only interest. Still, the primitive, childish, old yet ever new interest suffices. And the pages are turned with the greatest impatience when the reader, very naturally and very healthily, wishes to know, not what moral lesson is to be drawn, not what emotion is to be described, but what happened, what he said or what she said, and what the result was. The cinematograph therefore appeals to a healthy instinct, but is unfortunately working evil, inasmuch as it is, by its sensationalism, blunting the interest in the narration or representation of ordinary or possible incidents and is further blunting the popular imagination, and is stereotyping character.

EPIC. The highest type of narrative poetry is the Epic. The Epic is somewhat difficult to define precisely. Lord Kames gives a fairly sufficient definition. "As to the general taste there is little reason to doubt that a work where heroic actions are related in an elevated style will, without further requisite, be deemed an epic poem." We might merely suggest as a further requisite that the work shall be *poetry*.

The cultivated view of the Epic is naturally strongly influenced by the example of those Greek epics which have ever been looked upon by Europe as the most perfect, namely the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Therefore the tendencies to define the

Epic as being equivalent to Homeric, and to judge that any characteristic of a poem which is un-Homeric is un-epic.

One characteristic of the Homeric epic serves to distinguish between two types of epic which may be called the natural and the artificial.

The *Iliad*, for example, was not the work of a single poet, nor was it written or composed within a short period. It grew up gradually out of a mass of traditions narrated in verse and handed down orally from generation to generation, growing and changing, until it was written down and took definite shape. Such epics are naturally of a strongly national type, closely bound up with the life and history of the nation out of which they arose spontaneously. Most great nations have their epic therefore. The Greeks have their *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Indians their *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the English their *Beowulf*, the French their *Chanson de Roland*, the Irish their *Cuchul-lin*. These are all national epics of popular origin.

The artificial epic is the work of a single man of letters, of a conscious artist, who is generally guided by a theory or an example. Such are the *Æneid* of the Latin poet Virgil, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and a host of lesser works, all more or less influenced by conceptions derived from the example of Homer.

ROMANCE. It is more difficult to distinguish clearly between an epic poem and a romantic poem, for the reason that most epics have romantic elements in them. Homer's *Odyssey*, for example, is strongly romantic. Roughly speaking, the epic describes real life or possible history on a magnified scale, in a language suitable to the dignity of the events and persons described. The romance brings in characters, events, objects, of pure imagination. Achilles, for example, in the *Iliad*, is a possible historic figure, presented as of heroic stature and bravery, and is an epic personage. But Polyphemus, in the *Odyssey*, with his one eye in the centre of his forehead, is a creature of the imagination, and is a romantic figure. The bow of Ulysses, which is credible, is epic; but in *Ramayana*, the bow of Rama, which is incredible, is romantic. There must, in short, be some true correspondence with real human life if that which we call epic interest is to be maintained, whether in incident or in character. So the epic interest in *Paradise Lost* is safeguarded by the fact that we see in Satan the image of ourselves in many respects, so that he, and not Christ or even Adam, becomes as it were the epic hero. Epic then signifies the near or familiar, on however grand a scale, and Romantic the remote and strange.

The wide term "romantic" involves a second distinction in narrative poetry. It signifies a personal manner of dealing with a subject, as contrasted with

the detached, impersonal attitude of the epic poet. Where the reader perceives traces of the private feelings of the poet, where the treatment of the subject is modified and coloured by the personality of the poet, there is the romantic manner in this second sense.

MORTE D'ARTHUR. The *Morte d'Arthur* was described by its author as being "faint Homeric echoes." There are distinct imitations of Homeric mannerisms which will be pointed out in the Notes. There is, what is more important, a general simplicity, terseness and directness in the narrative, and an economy of phrase.

There is further an intentional archaism in the diction, which helps to reproduce the impression of the old epics. The subject is of heroic quality, and arose out of the national history of the Britons. There are, however, strong romantic elements in both manner and subject. As regards the subject, the old national legend has gathered round it many accretions, due to the conscious imagination of poets, of a strange and wonderful sort, such as the *Lady of Shalott* or the magic sword Excalibur. The personality of the poet, again, has profoundly modified both subject and character. The subject is allegorized and takes on a moral significance, "shadowing sense at war with soul," in the whole series of *Idylls of the King*. The thoughts and feelings of Arthur are not those of a primitive or even a mediæval king, but are such as reflect the nineteenth century, the age of the poet.

CONCLUSION. Let it be understood that we are not here maintaining the superiority of the epic manner of narrative over the romantic manner, but merely illustrating the differences between the two. Any preference of one to the other must be a matter of taste or of mood, given works of equal excellence in either manner. It would, for example, be folly to argue that *Sohrab and Rustum* is superior to *The Eve of St. Agnes* because the former is epic in manner and the latter is romantic. The question is whether each is good in its own kind, and in this respect also we may make comparisons and form preferences.

II. THE POET.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON (1809-1892), was born at Somersby in Lincolnshire. His father was a clergyman, rector of the parish. The level landscape, the fens and the sea of Lincolnshire left a deep impression upon Tennyson, and he always cherished memories of the rectory house, that "haunt of ancient peace." He was educated mainly at first by his father, together with his brother Charles, and in 1827 the poetic talent of both brothers was shown in a small volume *Poems by Two Brothers*.

In 1825 both entered Trinity College, Cambridge, and took their places among a group of brilliant young men, many of whom became only less famous than

Tennyson himself. One of these men was Hallam, who became his intimate friend, and whose untimely death was mourned by Tennyson in his long and beautiful elegy, *In Memoriam*, in his later life.

Tennyson's University Prize Poem *Timbuctoo* (1829) promised better things to follow, and his *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), showed already his beginning mastery of technique, verbal music and exquisite imagery. In 1831 he left Cambridge and lived at Somersby until 1835. The rest of his life is mainly a history of the development and fruits of his poetic genius, to which he dedicated himself entirely.

In 1832 a further volume of *Poems* appeared, and thereafter no more for ten years. Up to now, in all these early poems, Tennyson had been content to paint pictures of ideal, romantic beauty, with little significance, beautiful images of a dream-world. But soon the experience of life and of sorrow deepened his outlook and added a profounder humanity to his poetry. His friend Hallam died in 1833, to his unending sorrow. He had met and loved Emily Selwood in 1836, and the lovers were separated, on account of Tennyson's small means, until 1850, when they were married. And the poet laboured unremittingly, by study, effort and thought, to fit himself to be a great poet. Self-discipline, as well as the discipline of life, made him what he became by the year 1842.

The two volumes of Poems, published in 1842, consequently contained much of his finest poetry, imbued with a deeper seriousness and showing a new perfection of form.

We now find Tennyson occupying himself with the problems of the age. The feminist movement inspired a charming, if inconclusive, treatment in *The Princess* (1847). The Crimean War and the prevailing materialism of the time were reflected in the magnificent passionate monodrama *Maud* (1855), the death of the Duke of Wellington in the famous *Ode* (1852), and *In Memoriam* (1850) not only mourned the loss of Hallam but dealt with such religious and philosophical ideas as haunted the mid-Victorian mind.

The *Morte d'Arthur*, contained in the volume of 1842, foreshadowed a further development in the direction of narrative poetry, and the great series of *Idylls of the King*, begun in 1859, was not finished until 1885. And it is notable that the *Idylls* contain an allegory bearing upon the whole tendency of contemporary life.

The final stage in this continuous development was a profounder study of character, and the problems of human psychology, which led him to devote his energies to the drama. His plays, one at least of which was successful on the stage, namely *Becket* (1884), include also *Queen Mary* (1875), *Harold* (1876), and *The Cup* (1881).

Not the least remarkable fact in this life of devotion to poetry is the maintenance of poetic power up to the very end; and great things are contained in the last volumes published in 1889, and 1892, the year of the poet's death.

Tennyson's greatness was early recognised, already after the volume of 1832. Upon the death of Wordsworth in 1850 he was appointed Poet Laureate. Both Oxford and Cambridge honoured him, in 1855 and 1869 respectively, and in 1884 he was raised to the peerage with the title of Baron Tennyson of Aldworth. His death was felt as a national calamity, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Two peculiar qualities may be distinguished as being especially characteristic of Tennyson's poetry.

In the first place he is above all a conscious and exquisite artist and craftsman in verse. He constantly aimed at, and achieved, perfection of form. The general excellence of form in subsequent English poetry is largely due to the example of Tennyson, who had in his turn profited by the example of earlier poets, of Keats in particular. Therefore the most detailed study of the technique of Tennyson's poetry is valuable, for we may thereby appreciate the laborious skill and self-criticism that lay beneath the polished perfection of his expression, and the studied effects of rhythm, of sound and imagery.

In the second place, both for good and evil, he was the representative in his poetry of his own age, of its science, its philosophy, its problems, its general outlook upon life. He had an immense mass of general information and no mean knowledge of particular sciences, such as astronomy and biology. The doctrine of evolution pervades his verse, and he has wonderfully expressed its belief in that

".....one far-off divine event
To which the whole creation moves."

Herein lies partly the secret of his great and immediate popularity, in that he expressed adequately the whole life of his own people and his own times. Yet herein lies also part of his weakness. For it is less great to express, however adequately, the problems and ideals of a particular nation at a particular epoch, than to utter those thoughts that appeal to all men in all ages. There is in Tennyson, however, much that can make the proud claim that, like Shakespeare, it is "not for an age, but for all time," and on this his ultimate fame must rest. The thoughts and ideals of Tennyson, on the whole, no longer satisfy us. And we feel particularly in such works as the *Idylls of the King* that Tennyson's Victorian ideals and thoughts modify incongruously the story and the characters. And this is a serious defect in works which attempt to tell an old-world story and to reproduce an old-world atmosphere and society.

III. THE POEM, INFORMATION AND COMMENTS.

Already in 1832 Tennyson published a poem, *The Lady of Shalott*, touching upon the legends of King Arthur, and in 1835 he read this poem, the *Morte d'Arthur*, to his friend Fitzgerald. It was published in the volume of *Poems* of 1842 with a Prologue and Epilogue, the whole being entitled *The Epic*.

The Prologue tells how four friends meet together on Christmas Eve and converse. One of them, a clergyman, laments the decay of faith in the world. Another, the poet, Everard Hall, is asked about his gift for verse. He had written an epic in twelve books upon King Arthur, but had thrown it into the fire, as

"Faint Homeric echoes, nothing worth,—
Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt."

The host, Allen, however, had saved the eleventh book, and the writer of *The Epic*, the fourth present, calls for it. Allen brings it out and Hall reads it. It is the *Morte d'Arthur*. The Epilogue then tells how the friends went to bed, and how the writer was haunted by dreams of King Arthur, until Christmas morning comes, and with it the joyous Christmas bells ringing.

The *Morte d'Arthur* was finally incorporated in 1869 in one of the *Idylls of the King*, namely *The Passing of Arthur*, and so took its place in the great cycle of Tennyson's epic.

The legends of Arthur occupied Tennyson's mind almost throughout his long poetic career, from 1832, with *The Lady of Shalott* and *Sir Galahad*, to 1885, with the last written of the *Idylls*, *Balin and Balan*. He was, no doubt, mainly inspired by the prose masterpiece of Sir Thomas Malory (printed in 1485), the influence of which is clearly visible even in actual phrase, and which was a treasure-house of poetic material.

The legends of King Arthur as handled by Tennyson furnished not only an epic subject but also an allegory of modern life, even as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, the story of which is based upon Arthur, and which influenced Tennyson's poetic art. Even in the *Morte d' Arthur* the allegorical significance is present. The clergyman complains of the decay of the old faith, and the poem answers and corrects him.

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

So also the sword Excalibur, beautiful as it is, though it has done good work, must be thrown away. It is a symbol of the old order.

Yet the epic interest of this fragment altogether overpowers any moral significance, though this cannot be said of the *Idylls*. And in this sense it is Homeric. The style of the poem, moreover, is on the whole of

Homeric dignity and simplicity. The many reminiscences of Malory add to this impression. We may further notice the complete mastery of blank verse shown in the poem, the consummate descriptive power, exact as in lines 63-64, suggestive as in lines 8-12, and the echo of sounds in lines 186-190, and of rhythms in lines 138 and 49-51.

NOTE. Further information and comments may be found in the following books:—

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, by Alfred Lyall. (English Men of Letters Series.)

Tennyson, by Stopford Brooke.

Early Poems of Tennyson, edited by Churton Collins.

Literature of the Victorian Era, by Hugh Walker.

Morte d'Arthur, by Malory.